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Subject: Charleston Gazette (2-6) Home testing a start, but questions remain

Home testing a start, but questions remain

By Ken Ward Jr.

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin's plan to test a sample of homes for the toxic chemical Crude MCHM is a start, but the investigation needs to be carefully planned to be sure it answers important questions about long-term impacts of the Elk River chemical spill, an expert who is already studying the issue said today.

"Science needs to drive the train," said Andrew Whelton, a University of South Alabama environmental engineer who received an emergency National Science Foundation grant to support his work.

Whelton and a team of researchers drove to Charleston after the Jan. 9 spill and did some sampling of home tap water and helped some residents to "flush" their plumbing systems.

Since then, Whelton has offered to assist the state in a broader examination of the issue, but has not yet been brought in by Tomblin or other state and federal officials.

On Wednesday, after first brushing off the idea during a high-profile press conference, Tomblin later directed his spill response team to come up with a plan for testing the water in a representative sample of the 100,000 homes and businesses impacted by the spill.

State and federal officials have said residents can resume using water from West Virginia American Water's regional system, citing test results showing levels of Crude MCHM were below a controversial 1 part-per-million "screening level" set by the federal Centers for Disease Control.

But government officials have done no testing inside people's homes, and tests at local schools

have been only of chemical levels in the water - not of levels in the air, despite complaints about inhalation impacts and a lack of data on the inhalation toxicity of the material.

In recent days, West Virginia residents have increasingly been asking why the state Department of Health and Human Resources or the National Guard are testing water for MCHM only at the water treatment plant, at fire hydrants and in some public buildings, such as schools.

Outside experts have expressed concern that the MCHM and other chemicals from the leak could have been absorbed by home plumbing systems, where it could continue to leach into water -- even if in very small amounts -- for some undetermined amount of time.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials said Wednesday that they have a study that disputes this theory, but they have not released a copy of the study. EPA regional drinking water chief Bill Arguto suggested a reporter could get a copy from West Virginia American Water.

Prior to the governor's change of position Wednesday, Tomblin administration officials had rejected the idea of testing homes by saying there was no way they could possibly test all potentially impacted homes.

"There's not a hesitancy to do it, but there's a cost to it," Tomblin said Wednesday. "Trying to test a hundred thousand customers could be in the tens of millions of dollars."

Senate President Jeff Kessler suggested today that the state could test three or four homes in each of West Virginia American Water's 24 distribution districts. By one estimate of \$675 per test, Kessler said, that would cost the state only about \$65,000.

"If we would go out and do that and they would come back clean, it would go a long way toward restoring the public's faith in the water system," Kessler said.

Asked how reliable testing fewer than 100 homes would be scientifically, Kessler conceded he was not an expert and said the state needs to find experts who can help design an appropriate and properly sized study.

"I'm not the expert in the subject area, but I think it would be a start to do something," Kessler said. "I don't know what that study sample needs to be. If we had to do 2,000 to make it statistically sound, then so be it. We need facts."

Whelton said he hesitates to estimate how large of a study is needed, or how many homes should be sampled. State officials need to consult with outside experts, Whelton said, to figure out exactly what they hope the study will find out, and then design the study to meet those goals.

For example, Whelton said, the study needs to make note of the types of pipes in each home, and when home plumbing was "flushed," so that experts can draw conclusions about how the chemicals interacted with plumbing systems and how flushing impacted the chemical's presence in homes.

"The approach the governor is now moving toward is excellent," Whelton said. "It's a step in the right direction. The next step is to figure out the breadth and depth of this examination."